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ABSTRACT

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An Ecological Assessment of Maternal Teaching Style During Play Between Black Mothers and Toddlers

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Abstract

This paper presents a rationale for observing black mothers during semi-structured play activities with their toddlers. It appraises the strengths and weaknesses of such situational assessments of mother-infant dyads, arguing that in addition to observational data the collection of introspective interview data from mothers is essential. Interview data provide additional evidence for the validity of observed interactive behaviors. We hope to illustrate how observational and interview data cannot be substituted or interchanged; rather, the two sets of data are complementary. They should be combined to provide a truly "ecologically valid" assessment of black families and children.

An Ecological Assessment of Maternal Teaching Style During Play Between Mothers and Toddlers

I. Introduction

Some years ago, Hoffman and Lippitt (1960) proposed a conceptual scheme for grouping and analyzing family life variables, reviewed representative existing literature pertinant to each category within their scheme, and discussed related measurement problems associated with data collection. They noted many potential sources of distortion in verbal reports, such as those obtained using interviews. These potential distortions, well known to us now, include both deliberate and non-deliberate sources. As an example of the former, the parents may wish to create a certain socially acceptable image of themselves for the interviewer's benefit. Examples of the latter include instances in which the parents forget, are threatened by, or misunderstand information desired by the interviewer.

The authors also noted the problems associated with observational data. If home observations are to be made, the investigator risks influencing familial interaction by his/her mere presence, or obtaining costly extensive data, not all of which is usable for immediate purposes. Finally, the authors state: "...observations without introspective reports are insufficient for knowing what in fact is taking place..." (Hoffman and Lippitt, 1960, p. 999). However, Hoffman and Lippitt argue that introspective reports should supplement observational data most typically when the study focuses on theoretical perspectives which involve inferences, such as inferences to affective states, beyond concrete behavioral actions. We shall argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully interpret the meaning of any set of behaviors without supplementing observational data with introspective reports.

Hoffman and Lippitt also stated that a situational assessment can be useful to focus specifically on those observational variables of immediate interest; such variables may not, in a more naturalistic home setting, occur with sufficient frequency to be effectively studied across families. Recalling the work of Bishop in 1946 and 1951 (Hoffman and Lippitt, 1960, p. 1002), the authors reported that she successfully observed mother-child interaction in a playroom situational assessment in which each mother was instructed to imagine that she was in her own home and to behave accordingly. Bishop relied, in part, upon the behavioral repertoires of the young children to offset the artificiality of the situation; she expected that their behaviors would be more "natural," and thus elicit more typical modes of responding on the part of their mothers.

In our own planning, we concurred with Hoffman and Lippitt's assessment of Bishop's work. Because the structured situational assessment is much less costly, more focused on the variables of interest, and more adaptable to an experimental design, it had many advantages which, for us, offset its obvious artificiality by comparison to a home observational setting. Thus, during our efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of two parent education programs (Slaughter, 1973), we designed a situational assessment of play behaviors between black mothers and their toddlers. We essentially attempted to simulate a home living room situation, in which mother and child were jointly presented with the problem of finding something to do, together or separately. We used a comparable situation for all study participants to ascertain whether experimental program participants eventually played differently with their children than did control participants.

In this paper, we will first describe the theoretical rationale for observing maternal teaching behavior in our situational assessment. Secondly,

we will describe maternal behaviors observed in three quite diverse observational segments of videotaped mother-child dyads from different families and then illustrate how interview data clarify the meaning of of these behaviors. Finally, we will will conclude with a characterization of some of the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach, as discovered through our work with these families.

II. Rationale

Any observational system designed to study parent-child interactions is, in part, a function of the particular investigator(s) view of childhood development. For this reason, it is important to present some of the continuing research findings which stimulated this overall effort. In this paper, particular emphasis will be given to maternal behaviors.

Recent developmental literature, including that of ourselves (Slaughter, 1968, 1969, 1977) has emphasized the role of the mother as teacher to the young preschool child, in addition to the better known roles of nurturer, caregiver, and frequently, provider. The evidence comes from theoretically and methodologically diverse sources, including both interview and observational studies, using home, experimental, and waiting room contexts. Some studies have emphasized social class (Bee, 1969; Brophy, 1970; Hess and Shipman, 1965, 1967; Stodolsky, 1968), or ethnic (Steward and Steward, 1973) differences, with preschool aged children typically being observed at one point in time. Others have emphasized individual differences within lower income groups (Slaughter, 1969; Gordon, 1969; Herman, 1970; Radin, 1971). Some have emphasized repeated observations, thus employing longitudinal designs (Clarke-Stewart, 1973; Carew, 1975). Others have obtained such data in the conduct of

experimental intervention programs targeted at mother-child dyads (Gordon, 1970; Schaefer, 1969; Robinson, 1975; Levenstein, 1977). Where black populations have been involved, children have either been studied before age eighteen months (see, for example: Caldwell, 1964; Clarke-Stewart, 1973; Lewis, 1971; Yarrow, 1975), or as in many of the other works cited above, at ages 3 1/2 to 5 years.

Studies have varied in the amount of detailed emphasis on the interactive process, ranging from the use of interview data (Slaughter, 1969) to fine-grained examination of maternal-infant behaviors via videotapes (Kaye, 1977). Many studies have emphasized specific areas such as verbal behavior (Stodolsky, 1968; Snow, 1972).

Most studies have not involved black populations. If they have, socioeconomic contrasts in modal patterns have been emphasized (Hess and Shipman, 1965). Blacks and whites of similar socioeconomic backgrounds are rarely contrasted, but when they have been, as a group black lower income mothers appear less verbally stimulating and responsive to their children than lower income whites (Bee, 1969; Clarke-Stewart, 1973). At least one investigator has concluded: "Black mothers--who spent as much time with their children as did white mothers--spent more time controlling and physically caring for their children, while white mothers were more likely to spend time talking and playing with their children." (Clarke-Stewart, 1973, p. 93).

In our view, race as a significant variable in developmental research is best considered in terms of evolving familial structures and caregiving systems which are designed to thwart barriers to familial and childhood development as experienced by several generations of black American families.

Thus, an examination of individual differences in familial structures and dynamics within black lower class, as well as black middle class, families is crucial for understanding parent-child interaction. This implies that any direct observational study of black parents and children which emphasizes how the children learn from their parents must be supplemented by interview data suggestive of the functional significance of the parents' behaviors to them. While patterns of interaction may not be unique to a specific racial group, to the extent that they exist with certain observable regularity, to that extent they are functionally adaptive to a particular composite of familial structure and caregiving system. It is within these composites that mothers, and parents generally, teach their young children.

Since all research must have some guidelines, however, it is important to consider what these studies of maternal teaching in the early childhood years do appear to reveal. In our summary, we will include the work of a pilot study done by one of our students (Copson, 1977) and the work of Schoggan noted by Bell (1968) in his discussion of observational studies of young white toddlers at home with their mothers.

First, mothers at home with their young infants and/or preschool children do not do much didactic teaching or lecturing with them. Their teaching is decidedly dissimilar to the formal teaching conducted in elementary school or higher grade classrooms. They do not have lectures or lessons, as such, planned for their children.

Second, their teaching is likely to be prompted by the child's initiative and questioning, and to be terminated according to the child's interest. It is likely to be relatively episodic or "on the run" so to speak. In effect, teaching as a maternal activity, distinguished from nurturing or caregiving

occurs only infrequently and, in any event, is likely to be part of a stream of maternal activity which includes conducting household chores, greeting visitors, and the like. In the parent's own stream of consciousness, teaching may be viewed as an aspect of nurturing or caregiving; thus it is the style of these maternal behaviors and the context in which they occur which might be most often decisive as to whether a given behavior or sequence of behaviors becomes identified as primarily teaching, rather than primarily caregiving or nurturing in focus.

Third, the character of this teaching is interest-oriented, done in social context, often with no obvious "lesson." Typically, the child will pose, verbally or nonverbally, a question, the mother may answer, press for the child's understanding of her answer, pursue her own explanation one time further if the child does not appear to understand, and then drop the "lesson" if the child still has not grasped her point. Teaching seems to be informing in a very simple, straightforward way. It is not necessarily aimed at the child's self or object discovery, or mastery over his environment in a very specialized sense. At their best, such maternal-child contacts may have an element of flair or drama to them, insofar as they are instigated, guided, expanded, or elaborated by the mother.

Fourth, it appears that mothers actually spend a very small percentage of their time teaching their young children, and that only a small percentage of time is required for optimal growth and development. Maternal teaching, as estimated from mutually reciprocal interactions between mother and child, occurs between two to five percent of observed time in homes during the first two years of life. Carew (1975), defining effectiveness in part in terms of child performance outcomes on the Binet at 36 months, has reported that by 30-33 months the percentage of observed teaching time during the course of a

nine to five hour day is about thirteen per cent for effective mothers, seven per cent for less effective ones.

Fifth, results of two somewhat differently designed longitudinal studies of young children (Carew, 1975, ages 12-36 months; Clarke-Stewart, 1973, ages 9-18 months) indicate that within these interactive play contexts mothers who are contingently responsive and participatory with their children at younger ages, appear to produce children who thrive and are more competent at later ages. This apparent competency extends to both cognitive performance tasks and observed child behaviors.

Sixth, the minimal evidence available suggests that the child's acquisition of knowledge as measured by cognitive performance tasks is enhanced by this interactive exchange between mothers and children, and that despite the importance of bidirectionality in childhood growth and development, the organization of knowledge proceeds from parent to child where, in response to the child's social and questioning behaviors, the parent may, intentionally or not, influence the course of cognitive development.

Seventh, these maternal behaviors are not discrete particular behaviors or techniques such as praise or disparagment, but are part of an overall style of behavioral organization. The style emphasizes the proactive, orienting, structuring, stimulating, focusing elements of maternal behaviors in interaction with young children. It is in contrast to restrictive, controlling, or laissez-faire orientations, however warm in character and well-intentioned in aim.

Eighth, the styles are not, strictly speaking, ipso facto determined by adult verbal fluency or speech patterns. Rather, the emphasis is on communication, what it is used for, when and how. Hence both verbal and

nonverbal maternal behavioral patterns are of interest. For example, Goldin-Meadow (1977) has recently found that there is an ordered pattern of communication between congenitally deaf children and their mothers. Even though these children had experienced minimal auditory input, they nonetheless developed a "language": communication between mother and child in these young children was observed and documented.

Brinich (1974), however, has found no relationship between observed maternal nonverbal and verbal behaviors and older (ages 5-6 1/2 years) deaf and hearing children's cognitive task performances. At this age, only the children's behaviors toward their mothers (statements, questions, etc. rendered nonverbally and verbally for the deaf and hearing groups respectively) were related to cognitive performance. His study suggests that there is an upper age limit or threshold relative to maternal impact on children's cognitive development, and that this limit is related to the extent to which the child assumes major responsibility for structuring his own acquisition of knowledge. Both the Goldin-Meadow and Brinich studies leave open the question of the role of maternal behavior in deaf children's cognitive performances, but they do illustrate significant, ordered nonverbal patterns of communication between the children and their mothers.

These and similar observations directed our research efforts. We wanted to see how variability and patterning in maternal behaviors related to observed children's play competency, and possibly, cognitive performance outcomes at the conclusion of our parent education programs. To characterize informal maternal teaching in our play session, we found it useful to code social context, initiator of context, and the themes or functions of maternal behavior within the context. We observe both verbal and nonverbal behaviors to code maternal themes. At teach ten second interval of our videotaped twenty-four minute play sessions we code context, initiator, and theme.[1,2]

To code social context, we consider whether the mother and child are interacting, essentially engaged in independent activities, or engaged in separate activities which have similar behavioral repertoires (parallel). To code initiator, we consider whether these contexts are jointly created, or created primarily by mother or by child.

At any given ten second interval, mothers may be involved or uninvolved with the child. Depending upon whether the child is engaged in play with toys or other objects in our setting, if the mother is involved, we characterize her according to whether she essentially encourages his continued participation in the activity or deflects his attention elsewhere. If the child is not playing, we judge if, and how, the mother attempts to involve him/her in play.

We have found it useful to characterize mothers who emphasize discontinuance of an ongoing child play activity, whether verbally or nonverbally, as either restrictive or redirective. In the former case, but not the latter, no alternatives or reasons are presented. Mothers who emphasize continuance of a play activity can be viewed as being either supportive, expansive, or instructive. When they are supportive, they essentially are monitoring or encouraging the play. When expanding, they make an obvious effort to extend the child's ideas about what he is doing, often showing, for example, new possibilities for a toy(s). When instructing, mothers make a specific attempt to "show" and often "tell" the child something about what he/she is already doing so that he can "master" the effort. Merely labelling the child's ongoing activities verbally, for example, is coded expanding. Finally, when children are not engaged in any play activities where mother gets involved we have found it useful to characterize maternal behaviors as either directive or suggestive (enticing). To date median interobserver agreements on context,

initiator, or maternal themes are .90 or better.

In summary, maternal teaching from our perspective is evaluated from observational data according to whether or not it facilitates the course of the child's play. In view of this perspective, we will describe three different short segments obtained from our study participants (Cases 070, 218, 072), and offer interview data which help to clarify the perceived meaning to the mothers of their interactive styles of teaching their young children. Though the children were 24, 26, and 30 months of age, these age differences appeared less significant than did the influence of familial structure and social background. The cases were chosen for illustrative purposes because of the varied patterns of mother-toddler interaction; we subsequently reviewed our interview data for characterization of familial structure and dynamics.

III. Three Illustrative Cases

Case 070

This observation involved a mother and her 26 month old son. In response to instructions from the field observer, the mother noted: "I don't play with him at home." She was encouraged not to do anything differently from what she would do at home.

The early part of this session was characterized by independent activities on the part of mother and child. The child's initial overtures to the mother were not sustained by her, and typically, he wandered around the room, as if trying to find something to do. The mother usually read a magazine, occasionally glancing up at the child. Within a seven minute span, the mother verbally restricted the child several times. At least once, she had to physically stand, walk to where he was, and retrieve him

to the center of the room. At no time did she offer him behavioral options. He was told what not to do, but not guided as to what he could do. The child did play alone, but had to be restricted by the mother when, with shifting interests, he attempted to explore beyond the boundaries of the room.

At the very end of the session, the last three to five minutes, the mother changed her tactics. She invited the child to come and play with a doll with her, moving the doll back and forth in her hands; the child did so. The session ended on a cozy note: they had found something to do together.

Interview data revealed that this mother lived alone with this child and an older brother, age six, who was in first grade. She had no adult who could be construed as "secondary caregiver" and no interest in discussing the child's father. He apparently contributed no personal or financial resources to their household. The mother perceived the child's older brother as the significant playmate in his life, reporting that "He shows him how to play, how to eat something, how to do something." She believed that the child did not want anyone like herself to play with him, that she would "mess up his toys," though she did say that they have a very affectionate and warm relationship.

The mother also reported that she believed the child did not know enough words and concepts. Previously, she had tried to read to him, but found that he would snatch the book from her, and not let her turn the pages. She hoped that he would talk more by the time he entered kindergarten.

The mother expected that teachers will give "book learning" and that her role will be to offer "moral guidance." She would like both of

her sons to have a "consistent, stable environment in a small town where they know the same kids, go to school together..."

The mother, herself, was born in the South, and reared by a fairly firm grandmother. The Catholic School she attended emphasized "good manners." Since coming to Chicago, she had worked as a typist though at the time of the interview, at age 29, she received public assistance. She had limited social contacts, a few with neighbors and the PTA, in which she was not deeply involved. She aspired to attendance in nursing school, but had not yet achieved this goal.

These interview data illustrate why, from the mother's perspective, she does not play with her child; she reserves informal teaching through play to another, considerably younger, family member, and actually feels that is is not an appropriate exchange between the two of them. The data also reveal that she does not presently see any linkages between her role as a mother, and a role as facilitator of the child's conceptual development. Conversely, in this single parent household there is an appropriate fusion of stereotyped male and female parenting roles: specifically, this mother perceives that she has a major responsibility for giving moral guidance to her sons. While she is ineffective as a teacher relative to our study, she is not likely to be ineffective as a leader in the household. The obvious constraints on the latter role include the minimal external resources that she now reports which could be supportive of her own socialization efforts. We believe these constraints do not originate primarily from her inadequacies as a mother, but from the socioeconomic and political plight of many black parents in this nation. Notably, her efforts to lead a better life in the North have not yet

materialized.

Case 218

This observation involved an eighteen year old mother and her 24 month old son. During an extended eight minute segment, the mother repeatedly encouraged her child to "do something," presenting him with first one toy and then another. At one point, frustrated in efforts to get him to play with blocks with her, she announced: "Well, if you won't play with me, I'll build my own (tower)." The child subsequently took considerable pleasure in knocking over her tower, though she did not reprimand him for this action. In fact, they repeated this episode two or three times.

At another point, the mother thrust the doll in the child's face as he sat on the tricycle looking straight in the direction of the video-camera. Because the doll was thrust at an angle, the child was surprised and frightened by the doll and physically withdrew from both mother and doll, thrusting his hand between his face and them. His interest in the doll, however, was renewed when he observed that if mother pulled the string, the doll made noises as the string returned to rest position. There was a brief interlude in which he and she pulled the string together, an event he found highly pleasurable. However, he steadfastedly refused three attempts on her part to get him to "hold the baby." The entire session was characterized by the mother's inability to follow the child's lead in helping him find something to do, her persistent efforts to help him, and his apparent resistance to, and/or amused tolerance of, her efforts. Somehow, through joint persistence, they got on together.

This mother-child dyad, as revealed from interview data, lives in an extended family situation. The child's grandmother, age 47, has

several sons herself, ages 17, 15, 13, and 10. She also has another daughter older than the child's mother. The seventeen year old uncle is the significant male in the child's life, though the mother also reported frequent and positive contacts with the child's natural father.

The child, at a younger age, was hospitalized with a fractured skull, obtained when he fell on the concrete floors in his home. However, the entire family perceives this child as being "bright, a star, and the whole family lives him, teaches him things, tell him words and he picks it up quick." The mother herself delights in "showing him off" to her friends. Currently unemployed, she relies heavily for additional care-giving services upon her own mother. Born in Chicago, she achieved an eleventh grade education, and has done factory work.

Interview data revealed the family composition in this household. The mother, as a young mother living in the presence of her own mother may be somewhat unsure about when and how to exercise authority with this child, a child in the "terrible two's" of whom the family members have such a high positive consensual agreement. She prefers to parade him before a series of adoring observers, rather than to teach him how to learn from her. She believes this to be a minimal issue in their lives because she feels the child can learn from so many other family members.

Conversely, the child obviously is highly sensitive to the fact that "little boys don't play with ugly old dolls." He probably wants to be and act as much like his older uncles as possible, and he is probably encouraged in his efforts by both males and females in his household.

A close knit extended family whose upwardly mobile aspirations have been thwarted because they are black is likely to report a number of

stressors among themselves which affect optimal family functioning. This family reported seven of eleven possible stressors. In such a social context, where people are highly dependent upon each other to survive, it is difficult, but not impossible, for a young mother to learn how to parent her child, if effective informal teaching relative to conceptual development is considered part of that parenting role. The resiliency of this young mother is demonstrated in her persistent "trial and error" efforts to "get it on" with her child. The child, perceived as a gift to this embattled family, will for awhile undoubtedly receive the best that each family member can offer. Our data do not do justice to the many interpersonal contexts in which this child will learn, and has already learned; but our data do illustrate how he is likely to learn from his mother.

Case 072

This observational segment between a mother and her 30 month old son is divided into two five minute segments. During the first five minutes and beyond of this play session, the mother spent considerable time playing with her son and talking with him about the toys as well as other possible things to do in the room together. She was observed to demonstrate play activities, to focus the child's attention, and to facilitate his own efforts in play. She did this from the very beginning of the session, and only retreated to her own chair about midway through the session.

After this joint activity, the child played alone in a focused and invested way. During the last five minutes of the session, the child, smiling, confidently rode the tricycle around the room. The mother either flipped through the pages of a magazine, glanced at the

child, or turned toward a window behind her chair, indicating her own emergent restlessness. It was apparent that, had she been at home, she would have moved to other activities, possibly household chores. It was also apparent that she had enabled the child to play independently through her earlier activities.

This child, according to interview data, was the only child in a two parent household. Both parents were age 23, and the father worked in the steel mills. The mother had lived in Chicago in the same community all her life, and had worked full time up until the child's birth.

The mother reported that she wants to be a nursery school or kindergarten teacher. Since the child was 12 months of age, she has read to him every night for five or ten minutes. She valued his independence, reporting that she was most pleased when he told his doctor what was wrong with him.[3] Commenting on the child's play, this mother said: "A child's play is like his occupation-since he's a child he plays-it's just like work." She views her role as being one of helping him to, in the future, "really understand his schoolwork so he'll like it more."

There was some indication from the interview that mother and father had communication problems. In any event, mother perceived the child's maternal grandmother, age 44, as the secondary caregiver. It is possible tht she had focused on developing this very optimal informal teaching relationship with her son because other aspects of her life were less satisfying.

These interview data encourage us to make a more conservative

appraisal of this exchange between mother and child. Clearly, this mother, whether she knows it or not, has values which parallel those of the middle classes as far as socialization prescriptions for her child; but it is not so apparent that the motivating force for these values is on a solid, positive family foundation. Rather, the mother seems determined that her son have a better life as an adult than she and father are having. She perceives education and knowledge as the major vehicle for that life. She seems to expect less for herself and her family in the immediate present. We believe this perspective to be as characteristic of some families in the black lower classes as the perspectives offered by families 070 and 218.

The important point for our research effort is that the child from family 072 is likely to learn more directly from his mother than children from families 070 and 218. We cannot conclude, however, that he will learn more in general from his interpersonal contacts. We can conclude that, since the bond between the mother and her young child is particularly salient, other influences could be mitigated or strengthened through her appraisals and evaluations of them.

Now given <u>only</u> our observational data, mother 070 appears generally uninvolved, perhaps indifferent, toward her son. She typically interacts with him only for purposes of controlling or restricting his behavior. She never really plays with him, and seems a prime example of the mother who deprives her child of verbal and other playful stimulation. Mother 218, also from a lower income black community, appears to overly direct, redirect, and suggest activities to her son, never permitting him to invest in <u>any</u> play activity, regardless of how they are generated. As a young mother she appears markedly insensitive and inappropriately responsive to her son's behaviors. In short, she appears unstructured, disorganized, and overly stimulating towards

her son, a characteristic frequently attributed to lower income black families. Finally, mother C72 appears to be the exceptional lower class mother. She is appropriately suggestive, supportive, often expansive and instructive vis-a-vis her child's activities. During the three dyadic play sessions, only child 072 achieved higher rated levels of independent play. Such mothers are often perceived by outsiders to possess "middle class values."

However, our interview data suggested that differing interpretations of the function of a child's play in family life at least in part accounts for these widely varying behaviors. Mother 070 perceives this as an activity to be delegated to an older sibling, thus freeing her to perform both instrumental and expressive roles for the total family. Mother 218 views play as an opportunity for her son to demonstrate what she knows he can do. Play, in effect, becomes an opportunity for the child to practice acquired skills which are socially valued by herself, and presumably, other members of her household. While both mothers feel very affectionate toward, and proud of, their sons, they simply do not perceive that their children are inherently motivated to learn through play and that as parents they can be instrumental as to the qualitative course of that play. Thus, mother 070 delegates responsibility for play to other members of the household, and mother 218 either unintentionally forces her child to perform (play) and/or frustrates his ongoing efforts to construct experiences for himself.

Finally, interview data obtained from mother 072 suggest that her own behaviors, while superior to other mothers in the observational setting, are not necessarily indicative of just "optimal maternal care"; they may also be indicative of an overprotective investment in her son's independence and achievement as a reaction to other perceived personal dissatisfactions in her

own adult life. We suspect that this is the case for many black and white middle class mothers who are so often portrayed as the idealized norm for lower income families. In any event, the relationship between observed maternal teaching styles and maternal personality processes is more complex than existing literature implies, particularly in view of the paucity of research studies in this area.

Of course, from the viewpoint of all black mother-child dyads, the generalizability of much of the above information must be carefully considered. Little data now exist suggestive of how these mothers do in fact teach their young children informal settings. Furthermore, the sociohistorical-political situation of black families has often compelled them to emphasize work, rather than play, in adult-child interactions. Play may be perceived by adults as the antithesis of work, thus having little functional value for the child or the family. We need to know much more about the social contexts--community, family structure and dynamics, and life style--in which children from survival-oriented communties play during their formative years. Such data would permit us to draw educational implications given our knowledge of the children's earlier and continuing social experiences.

IV. Commentary on Our Observational Assessment

We must now appraise the strengths and weaknesses of our situational assessment. This appraisal is important because we have, hopefully, just demonstrated how interview data can elucidate the meaning of observed behaviors. Until this point we have assumed that the stylistic variations in maternal teaching which we have observed are, in fact, representative samples of what we would have seen, admittedly over less focused and intensive time periods, had we conducted home observations. Since this is a

major assumption, it is important to assess the merits of our observational procedures.

The current enthusiasm for using observational methods partially exists because many investigators hope to eliminate discrepancies between, for example, parental reports of adult-child interactions and the actual character of these interactions (Lytton, 1971). However, some investigators (Belsky, 1977) report data suggestive of significant and importnat discrepancies between parent-child transactions in the laboratory free play situation and at home, while others report minimal difficulties in this area (Ainsworth, 1971). Belsky found significantly more interactions between mothers and their twelve month old infants observed in the laboratory, and more behaviors which could be characterized as socially desirable were observed on the part of mothers.

We have at least three major criticisms of our own efforts to simulate a home living room situation. We believe, first, that we truncated highly intimate behaviors between the children and their mothers. Mothers were least likely to severely punish or affectionately embrace their young children before an observer and videocamera. Secondly, we maximized the possibility of interactions between mother and child because mothers had fewer behavioral options in our setting than they would have at home. They also had no intrusions and no household responsibilities. Thirdly, many children had more options, given the number and diversity of toys with which to play, than they would at home. We found that in view of these toys, many children were less inhibited than they otherwise might have been in a novel situation, and initiated and participated in interactive contacts with their mothers quite freely. We hope that <u>how</u> they did will be representative of their behaviors at home in similar contexts.

Since we wanted to evaluate the style and character of mothers' informal teaching, we designed a situation which would offer us the most information about this interactive process, not about all interactive exchanges between these children and their mothers. Since children are naive study participants, we expected that their approaches would be more characteristic of typical home behavior, and that these approaches would constitute a "press" on mothers' behaviors. We mention this because of our concern with contemporary definitions of "ecologically valid." For some it seems ecologically valid has come to mean "what people do in their immediate home environments." From our perspective, however, "ecologically valid" means "what people do in any unstructured environment where no predetermined task is give to them, and how they perceive the meaning of what they do."

Whether the data are ecologically valid, therefore, depends upon whether they are representative of those informal teaching exchanges which do occur, occasionally, between mother and child at home. Validity also depends upon how these teaching exchanges are understood by the mother in the context of the total familial environment. These data will not address the question of who the children learn from, when, or where. Rather, they will address the question of how the child learns when he/she learns from his/her mother.

We assumed that (a) each mother had certain socialization goals upon which she could report to us, and (b) that she had at least an intuitive means for achieving these goals which we could observe. We also assumed (c) that we could evaluate these means from the viewpoint of their merits for childhood development. Finally, we assumed that we needed to consider each of the above assumptions in data collection and interpretation.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe we have designed a parsimonious way of observing maternal teaching behavior with young children which has some ecological validity. This method is particularly appropriate to studies which are evaluative in nature, thus requiring baselines for all study participants. It preserves the sense of how teaching and learning occur in natural settings without compromising all experimental rigor. From this viewpoint, our methods may be useful to others faced with similar problems.[4]

We have also indicated that we believe we cannot fully interpret our obtained observational data without consideration of the meaning of our simulated play experience for mothers' perceptions of their children's play in the course of their normal family lives. Even had we conducted home observations we would be confronted with this issue, for parents interpret the developmentally related behaviors of their children according to the social and cultural import these behaviors have in their own communities. This import, we believe, cannot be determined functionally, that is by sole consideration of observational outcomes. It also cannot be determined, for obvious reasons, by asking parents why they do what they do. Rather, it has to be ascertained from a careful analysis of the relationship between what parenting behaviors we have regularly observed and how these behaviors articulate with our other knowledge of family structure and dynamics.

Footnotes

[1] We also code the qualitative aspects of children's play behaviors, as well as concrete maternal and child behaviors at the sound of the bleep at each ten second interval. For reasons of brevity, no discussion of these scales, either in terms of rationale or description, is presented.

[2] Our play sessions were restricted to 24 minutes because pilot work indicated this time interval as an upper limit to the amount of uninterrupted time a young child of about 2 to 2 1/2 years would spend in the same room with his/her mother.

[3] Mother 218 had been most pleased when her son helped her wash clothes, while mother 070 was most pleased at how affectionate her child had recently been with her.

[4] Copies, at cost of printing, of the complete report on the study are available from the author upon request.

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